

Souvenir

Jota Te

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Summary

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Description:

Three years after the Mist War, Adelbert Steiner travels to Burmecia to find the perfect wedding gift for Freya and Fratley. What could possibly go wrong? - a short story set within The Last Cherry Blossom's timeline

1. Souvenir

“Where am I, again..?”

Hopelessly lost, Adelbert Steiner turned the city map around, trying to make sense of the Burmecian capital’s bizarre street layout. The rain wasn’t helping matters either; there was more water in his shoes than in the entire Vube Desert.

The letter that had brought him to the rat folk’s kingdom had been a welcome bit of good news in the midst of a turbulent month; Freya and Fratley were finally getting married after falling in love all over again, and she wanted her closest friends to be at her side when she exchanged wedding vows with the only man she’d ever had eyes for.

The ceremony was scheduled to take place in a week, and Steiner had concluded that he wouldn’t find a suitable gift for the couple in Alexandria. Therefore, and despite Beatrix and Garnet’s more than reasonable concerns, he had traveled to the land of the eternal rain to search for *the* perfect present.

Soaked to the bone, the burly knight sought shelter beneath a hole-ridden awning and massaged

his temples, futilely trying to recall Zidane's advice. *'How do people even find their way around here?'* he grumbled to himself, realizing he had been walking in circles for almost half an hour. Frustrated and exhausted, he wiped a salty cocktail of rainwater and sweat off his brow and looked in all directions, trying to figure out how to find the darn city market.

"Oh, thank goodness!" he exclaimed as he laid his eyes upon a bustling tavern. He pocketed the map, adjusted his straw hat and crossed the street, jumping over an intricate archipelago of puddles.

As far as slimy taverns went, this one was as cliched as it gets; greasy, dimly lit, rowdy, and with enough alcohol vapor in the air to set the whole block ablaze. Zidane would have called it *cozy*.

Drenched from head to toe, the Pluto knight entered the pub and went straight for the counter, leaving a trail of mud behind as if he were a huge, Aloha-shirted snail. Despite being right in assuming it was an ideal place to ask for directions, his limited street-smarts had failed to warn him about the negative attention an obvious Alexandrian tourist would attract from the bar's war-hardened patrons.

“Excuse me,” he said, attempting to catch the attention of an overworked barmaid. The lanky demi-rodent gave him a once-over, decided he wasn’t worth her time, and promptly ignored him. “Rude...” Steiner grumbled, trying to take the affront in stride in order to save face.

Glaring at the soaked knight from across the tavern, an albino Burmecian covered in scars finished his drink, set his mug on the table he was sharing with three other lowlifes, and discreetly pulled out a short, jagged knife.

“Don’t be stupid, Horik. I’ll handle this,” said the only human in his gang, a dark-skinned brunette in her twenties, firmly gripping the bandit’s wrist.

“*Hrngh...* ten minutes, and I want half of the spoils. I saw him first,” the thug huffed angrily as he yanked his arm free.

With a satisfied smirk, the woman rose to her feet, fixed her clothes, and approached Steiner from behind with the silent grace of a shadow.

“Frida, dear, my friend here wants to order.”

Both Steiner and the barmaid cocked a startled eyebrow when they heard the bandit’s voice.

“S-Sure, Ms. Lani... what can I get for you, sir?” the tough Burmecian meekly asked, approaching the knight.

“A glass of milk would be fine, thank you.”

Lani snorted, much to Steiner’s dismay.

He grumbled, folding his enormous arms and turning even redder than a Hedgehog Pie. “What’s so funny?”

“Oh, nothing. I just think you’re cute,” the bandit stated, winking at him. “Whiskey for me, Frida. On the rocks.”

“Right away, ma’am,” the barmaid bowed to them before scurrying into the kitchen.

“Do we know each other..?” the knight asked, squinting at the young woman.

Lani clicked her tongue and conjured her sultriest smile as she sat on the stool next to him.

“Does that pick-up line still work in Alexandria?”

“Ah..! I’ll have you know I’m an engaged man!” he squawked, pointing an accusing finger at the would-be *femme fatale*. “Besides! How did you know I’m Alexandrian?!”

“Your... *accent* gave you away,” she lied, changing tactics on the fly. “Relax, handsome. Your fiancée has nothing to worry about.”

The barmaid came back with the drinks, and Lani thanked the gods for the timely interruption. She wasn’t used to being openly rejected.

“Um... I suppose I should apologize for my rudeness,” Steiner said after the two of them silently took a swig of their beverages in almost perfect sync. “Also, thank you for helping me. That’s the first act of kindness anyone has shown me since I arrived.”

“Heh. No need to thank me, stranger. Food and drink won’t be denied to anyone on my watch. Especially drink,” Lani answered, absentmindedly swirling the ice in her whiskey glass.

The burly soldier extended an open hand toward her as a peace offering, each of his fingers the size of a blood sausage.

“The name’s Adelbert. A pleasure,” he introduced himself with the Steiner equivalent of a warm smile.

“Lani, but I guess I needn’t introduce myself,” she answered, giving the man what would have been

a bone-crushing handshake for anyone other than him.

“Oh. You’ve got a nice, steady grip, m’lady. Armed forces, I presume?” the knight complimented her, and Lani saw this as the opening she needed.

“You have a sharp eye, soldier. Or hand, for that matter.”

“Heh. You could chalk it up to experience. Which branch do you serve in?”

“Army, but I work freelance now. Demilitarization is lovely and all, but the bills still won’t foot themselves.”

“Oh. Sorry to hear that...” Steiner said, awkwardly taking a swig of his beverage. “You don’t seem to be from around here...”

Lani chortled.

“How’d you figure that out, detective?”

“Sorry. That was a stupid question, I suppose...” the knight sheepishly admitted.

“Relax, soldier. I’m just messing with ya,” Lani chuckled, affectionately leaning on his shoulder in order to get a clear shot at his coin purse. Steiner

wanted to recoil and shake her off, devoted as he was to Beatrix, but the clientele began snickering at his expense, and he felt so embarrassed by the whole situation that he just drank his milk in silence, paralyzed by shame.

“You know... I could put in a good word for you if you wish to return to active service,” Adelbert offered, catching Lani completely off guard.

“You what, now?” she uttered, blinking dumbly at him.

“I know how hard things have been for most Mist War vets...” he said in a somber tone, lowering his gaze. “I’ve lost enough friends to realize how fortunate I am to still have a job at all.”

Lani’s fingers stopped inches away from the prize, hovering over both her and Steiner’s ticket out of a gruesome fight for their lives.

“Who are you?” she asked, wondering why her quarry’s face seemed so damn familiar.

“I am General Adelbert Steiner of Alexandria, and if you need money that desperately, you may keep whatever gil I have left after I fulfill my mission,” the knight stated, craning a knowing glance at the thief.

Lani closed her eyes and chuckled, feeling utterly defeated.

“That’s on me. Should have put two and two together when you told me your name...” she sighed, downing the last of her whiskey in one sorry gulp. “I take it you’ve already noticed my partners at the other end of the room.”

“Everyone is glaring daggers at me, so your friends are hardly my only concern,” Steiner answered, finishing his drink with the confident nonchalance of a man who had traded blows with the embodiment of Death and survived. “The big, ugly one regularly beats you, doesn’t he?”

“H-How..?”

“It was a hunch. I might not be the sharpest sword in the armory, but I’m still observant enough to notice the way you just glanced at him, and that old shiner you’ve tried to cover up with makeup.” He continued, idly turning the empty glass between his fingers.

Lani averted her eyes, painfully aware of the fact that blood would be spilled on that rainy afternoon, and it wouldn’t be Alexandrian.

“So... what now?” she asked.

Steiner sighed, knowing that what he was about to do would delay his plans at least a day, but he wasn't about to endanger lives and cause a diplomatic incident over something so petty.

“Take it.”

“What..?”

“Take the money,” he ordered through gritted teeth. “I’ll pretend I didn’t see a thing.”

Lani stared blankly at the general for a moment, then glanced back at Horik, who was already getting up from his chair with murderous intent. Opening her eyes wide, she tried to dissuade the gang leader by flicking her hand back and forth in a cutting motion, but unfortunately, the stubborn Burmecian had already made up his mind.

“Oh, shit...”

“He’s coming, right?”

“Uh-huh...”

Steiner sighed and stretched out his left leg, tripping up a burly patron who was returning to his table with several mugs of ale, causing him to crash right into Horik.

“Are you blind, asshole?” the bandit howled, wiping beer off his hair and eyes.

“The fuck you just called me?!” the giant barked back, rearing up a fist bigger than the albino’s head.

BLAM!

“Ooof!” Horik exclaimed as he landed on a nearby table, smashing it into splinters. *“Kill him!”* he roared as he got back up, and the rest of his gang minus Lani leapt into the fray, blades at the ready.

“IT’S ON, BITCHES, WOOO!” one of the giant’s equally huge friends hollered as he caught one of Horik’s goons by the neck and punched him across the room.

Their fight rapidly escalated into an all-out brawl as random strangers took advantage of the confusion to settle old scores, rob the vanquished blind, or simply engage in a little *“harmless”* fun as per Burmecian tradition.

“I knew I should have kicked you out as soon as I saw you...” the barmaid growled at Steiner as a flying Lindblumese tourist sailed over the bar and crashed right into the expensive liquor shelves.

“Will this suffice to pay for the damage?” the Pluto knight asked sheepishly as he handed his coin purse to her. Both the demi-rodent and Lani nearly fainted when they saw just how much money it held.

“Sure, come back anytime, handsome!” said the Burmecian, blowing a kiss at Steiner as he fled the tavern through the back door with the bounty hunter in tow.

“Great. *Just great!*” Lani spat as she kicked a pebble into the river, drenched to the point her normally luscious hair looked like a drowned Gimme Cat. The unlikely duo had found shelter from the rain under a stone bridge, knowing that Horik and the surviving members of his gang were probably out there, looking for them. “What the hell am I supposed to do now, Steiner?”

“You’re better off without them,” he dryly stated, wringing the lower half of his shirt.

“*Oh, and I suppose you expect me to thank you for painting a big fucking target on my back!*” she exclaimed at him, her hands on her hips.

“I never asked you to follow me,” Steiner huffed, not even bothering to look at her. “Besides, my previous offer still stands, even if your little stunt cost me my mission; so maybe you *should* be grateful.”

Lani opened her mouth to yell back at him, but she found herself speechless, much to her own bafflement. An awkward silence grew between them as Steiner tried to read his ruined map and angrily discarded it, deeming it unusable.

“Say, big guy...,” she finally broke the ice.

“What now?”

“You never told me what your business was here.”

Steiner sighed.

“I was looking for something — a gift, for a comrade.”

Lani snorted.

“What’s so funny?” Steiner grumbled.

“That’s it? *You went shopping for souvenirs and got lost?*” she laughed, covering her mouth.

“What makes you think I was lost?” he asked, mildly offended.

“Oh, nothing,” she said, picking up the soggy map from the ground. “Is your comrade a girl?”

Steiner silently averted his eyes, pondering whether disclosing Freya’s identity to a random lowlife was a good idea.

“I’ll take that as a yes,” Lani said with a smirk as she removed her earrings and handed them to the knight. “Here, I’ll save you the trouble of picking out jewelry for her; you’d probably fuck it up anyway.”

Adelbert stared at the earrings for a moment, captivated by their delicate beauty. They were crafted from mythril and adorned with tiny amethysts, resembling a cluster of lavender flowers.

“Uh... lady, I can’t accept these, they’re too...” he stammered, awkwardly looking up, only to find the bounty hunter had quietly vanished. “... beautiful,” he sighed, somewhat disappointed.

As the storm waned, the Pluto knight pocketed the earrings and began trying to find his way back to the airship station, wondering if he would ever see Lani again.

*Maybe it hadn't been such a terrible day after all,
he thought.*

A/N:

***I wrote this short story as part of a challenge,
and it's dedicated to my friends from the FFIIX
writers guild. I love you, guys :)***

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